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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AS
HUMANITARIANS?--YOU BET!

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College
in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Joint
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The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views
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Abstract of

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AS HUMANITARIANS?--YOU BET!

Special operations forces have unique capabilities that make them well suited for humanitarian relief operations, especially in the initial stages. Civil affairs and special forces personnel receive foreign language and cultural training and routinely work with foreign civilians and governments. These and other special skills can easily be adapted to humanitarian relief operations. Special operations forces' capabilities in relief operations were tested and proven highly successful during Operations Sea Angel and Provide Comfort. These "quiet warriors" were the first into the disaster areas to assess the situation, make recommendations on how to proceed, and organize the relief resupply efforts. As the number of humanitarian missions increase, theater Commanders-in-Chief and their staffs need to be familiar with these special operations force capabilities so they can be effectively employed. Instead of employing 'ad hoc' procedures for these missions, each theater planning staff should develop humanitarian relief concept plans that can be quickly pulled off the shelf and adapted to the particular situation.

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SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES AS HUMANITARIANS?--YOU BET!

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Gone are the days of the threat of global war between the super powers. Those days passed dramatically into obscurity with the break up of the Soviet Union. Now, we are coming to terms with a "new world order", or is it a new world disorder we are facing? The character of this new world taking shape is one few people would have imagined a few years ago. Smaller regional or internal conflicts are emerging as the dominant threat to world stability and security, and that, of course, gets the attention of the United States.

Not only are the actual civil wars and border disputes causing international concern, but one of the consequences--gross violations of human rights--is now getting front page media attention. Examples of these human rights abuses are mass starvation or genocide, or as the media has recently termed, man-made disasters. But, is this a mission for the United States military? Apparently so. Because of the magnitude of the problem, international relief organizations and the United States Department of State are addressing their shortcomings and are seeking support of United States military forces in their relief efforts. Humanitarian relief operations after natural disasters, such as floods and

earthquakes, have also increasingly been supported by the United States military.

The first United States forces to hit the ground are normally special operations forces. These "quiet warriors" are well suited for humanitarian missions. Their expertise in civil affairs organization, coupled with their language and cultural training, allow them to quickly assess the situation and make recommendations on how to organize for the mission. They can then work with relief organizations and other participating United States military forces to develop an initial plan, while preparing the victims for the relief mission.

As the acknowledged world leader, the United States will be called upon and challenged to take the lead in stabilizing our globe¹. Our assistance in man-made or natural disasters can only build trust and respect for our nation within those countries who are wary of United States intentions.

This paper will show why special operations forces are the theater Commander-in-Chief's (CINC) major tool for the initial phases of the humanitarian relief operation until order is established and the relief efforts can be turned over to international agencies to administer. The paper will discuss the emerging Third World threats (focusing on Africa and including examples from the Middle East) to international security and their associated human rights violations, address United States national and military strategies and review

United Nations efforts to meet this challenge. Special operations forces capabilities in dealing with the humanitarian assistance mission will be presented to illustrate that these forces should be first on the theater CINC's mind when he plans for these missions. The true test of special operations forces effectiveness will be shown in two recent disaster relief operations, Sea Angel and Provide Comfort.

Lessons learned from these operations indicate a need for theater command staffs to develop concept plans that could be pulled off the shelf and quickly adapted to the specific situation. In the final analysis, no one agency or organization can effectively administer the current, let alone the projected, number of humanitarian assistance operations. It will have to be a team effort, and United States special operations forces must be included in the starting line-up.

CHAPTER II

THE NEW WORLD DISORDER

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1989 was thought by many to mark the beginning of a new era of world peace and stability. On the contrary, almost immediately, we were faced with new crises and instabilities¹. During a short three year period, the United States has been involved in a major regional war (i.e., Persian Gulf) and two major humanitarian relief intervention operations brought on by civil wars (i.e., Provide Comfort in northern Iraq and Restore Hope in Somalia). Prospects for the future bring continued regional instability. Destructive forces that were formerly kept in check by the Cold War power balance could be unleashed by locally dominant powers armed with modern weaponry and ancient ambitions.²

During the Cold War, African states became pawns on the battleground for superpower conflict. Aid, increasingly in the form of weaponry, was provided by the United States or the Soviet Union--sometimes by both, in the case of Somalia.³ Ironically, stability was maintained in the region because neither superpower wanted to push the other to the point of instigating a conflict that could develop into regional conflict or nuclear war. But now that the Soviet Union has fallen, the superpower reasons for wanting to preserve stability are gone. With them are gone the checks and

balances of maintaining Africa's inherited boundary system, a source of great discontent for many African states.

It is these boundaries, created--often times arbitrarily--during African decolonization, that have caused, and will continue to cause, instability in the region. When the borders were originally drawn, they separated some social/ethnic groups and created economic inequities for others. The Organization of African Unity acknowledged that the boundaries would be a permanent source of dissension.⁴ As the superpower shackles are removed and the fledgling developing countries struggle internally to fill the power vacuum, these arbitrary borders will continue to be disputed.

One recent dramatic example of this boundary issue occurred in the Middle East. Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was justified by Saddam Hussein because he did not recognize the border established by Britain's decolonization plans after World War II. Some contend the invasion itself was not as stunning as the fact that "this sort of armed conflict has not occurred more often in a world made up of weak states that cannot defend their borders."⁵ Another example is the border dispute between Somalia and Ethiopia.

As superpower aid to Africa has withered, so has state-sponsored domestic support (including police and agricultural extension officers) to outlying areas of countries. This, of course, hinders local farming efforts. Additionally, civil wars have destroyed national infrastructure systems which

further exacerbates food distribution efforts.⁶ Add this to the human rights abuses inflicted on weaker ethnic groups by factions in control, and you can understand the development of the Kurdish refugee problem and the Somali starvation situation. This trend must stop, but that will take time and significant effort on the part of the world community lead by the United States under the auspices of the United Nations. Until the situation is stabilized, there will be continued human rights violations and refugee problems that will require humanitarian relief efforts.

Currently there are some 17 million refugees throughout the world, and these refugees create numerous problems. First, they need to be fed and sheltered. If they flee across borders to a neighboring country that does not want them, escalating problems can erupt. Large-scale population movements could upset regional stability. According to a United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees report, "during the 1990s, the global refugee situation had deteriorated in an unprecedented way, particularly in the Middle East and the Horn and western regions of Africa."⁷

The United Nations has long been an advocate for human rights and has sponsored countless humanitarian relief efforts around the globe. But the number and scale of effort are increasing. For example, relief operations in Somalia have been ongoing for over a year, but the international organizations involved, such as the International Committee of

the Red Cross and CARE, had a hard time dealing with the magnitude of the problem.⁸ The United States, in its world leader role and because of its highly respected success during the Kurdish humanitarian operation, was requested by the United Nations to assist. But these two were not your normal humanitarian relief missions where a nation sought support from the world community.

A new chapter in United Nations history was written when the United Nations Security Council voted to intervene in the internal affairs of a sovereign nation--Iraq. It determined that "the massive flight of the Kurds presented a threat to peace and security sufficient to override the principle of non-intervention."⁹ The relief effort in Somalia also falls into this "intervention" category. Now that the ground has been broken and the precedent established, the United Nations is likely to press its ever-strengthening clout by intervening in other trouble spots, especially where humanitarian assistance is required.

The United States military has also been called upon to assist in natural disasters (e.g., Mt. Pinatubo in the Philippines, a typhoon in Bangladesh, and Hurricane Hugo). Humanitarian relief operations responding to man-made and natural disasters are fast becoming a major mission for our military forces.

The current published United States National Security Strategy established by former President Bush specifically

addresses a global commitment to promoting human rights and responding quickly to natural or man-made disasters.¹⁰ Indications are that President Clinton agrees on these issues. His position on Africa during the campaign included "continued support to war victims in Somalia."¹¹ He also proposed "creating a United Nations Rapid Deployment Force that could be used for purposes beyond traditional peace-keeping for humanitarian purposes...We could also use this force to provide emergency assistance to the growing refugee population around the world."¹²

The National Military Strategy has also adapted to the changing world situation as it implements the National Security Strategy. Humanitarian assistance was emphasized to deal with the increasing number of man-made and natural disasters that can effect regional stability. This mission falls under the military strategy foundations of forward presence and crisis response.¹³

An increasing regional focus will place emphasis on the theater CINC's plans and capabilities to meet the regional threat. With a vast increase of humanitarian relief operations looming on the horizon, the theater CINCs need to develop a basic concept plan that could be pulled off the shelf and provide the foundation for this type of mission. These missions will normally be short-notice and a quick response may mean lives saved. A concept plan that can be implemented immediately, with changes made as required, is

definitely preferred over 'ad hoc' provisions, as will be shown in Operations Provide Comfort and Sea Angel. As discussed below, special operations forces provide the CINC with a highly capable initial response force for these humanitarian operations. When a CINC is faced with a humanitarian relief mission, his first instinct should be special operations forces. The following overview of special operations forces capabilities and discussion of their employment in two major humanitarian relief operations, Provide Comfort and Sea Angel, explain why.

CHAPTER III

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES CAPABILITIES IN HUMANITARIAN RELIEF ROLE

When one mentions special operations forces, most people think of the Rambo-type, clandestine, behind-enemy-lines combat "snake eaters". That perception is changing and has been since 1986 when Congress passed sweeping legislation that reorganized United States special operations policies, programs, and capabilities¹. Before then special operations forces were not well understood by the military in general nor well integrated into plans and training exercises, and the special operations community seemed to like it that way. The Iranian hostage rescue attempt in 1980 highlighted special operations forces' deficiencies.

Work began immediately to improve our special forces capabilities. In 1986 the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Crowe, summed up the future direction for special operations: "First, break down the wall that has more or less come between special forces and the other parts of our military...Second, educate the rest of the military--spread a recognition and understanding of what special operations forces do--and how important that it's done...Last, integrate special operations forces' efforts into the full spectrum of our military capabilities.²

The Cohen-Nunn Amendment to the FY87 Defense Authorization Act significantly changed special operations

forces organization and structure. The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) was established with unique responsibilities for all Army, Air Force, and Navy special operations. (Note: The Marines have no forces assigned to USSOCOM, but they do have some special operations capable forces.) USCINCSOC has his own program, budget, and acquisition authority for special operations forces and equipment under Major Force Program 11. In an era of drastic cutbacks, the USSOCOM force structure and operations and maintenance budget have increased.³ There has definitely been an awakening at all levels as to the capabilities of special operations forces since Admiral Crowe's statement and the Cohen-Nunn Amendment.

With this new understanding comes more effective employment of forces, even in humanitarian relief operations. Most theater joint planning staffs wouldn't automatically think of special operations forces for the newly emerging humanitarian relief missions. Part of the awakening process is to educate the rest of the military on what these "quiet warriors" can do either in conjunction with or independent of conventional forces. One possible reason for the lack of knowledge is that humanitarian assistance is only a collateral mission for special operations forces.

Their primary missions are probably more familiar--unconventional warfare, direct action (e.g., raids, sabotage), special reconnaissance, foreign internal defense, and

counterterrorism. However, their inherent capabilities to accomplish these primary missions make special operations forces suitable for employment in humanitarian assistance and other collateral missions.⁴ Who are special operations forces and what are their capabilities?

United States Special operations forces are comprised of Army Special Forces (i.e., Green Berets), Rangers, Psychological Operations personnel, Civil Affairs personnel, Special Operations Aviation units, and special mission units (not discussed in this paper); Air Force Special Operations aircraft units; and Navy SEALs. Probably the most important capability required for humanitarian relief operations is the ability to work with, and for, civilian populations. After a disaster where people have lost their shelter, they have no food, and chaos abounds, the first requirement is to establish some kind of order so food, medical aid, and other necessities can be provided. Special operations forces (e.g., civil affairs and Green Berets) are the only military forces specifically trained to work with civilians. Conventional forces are not.

Most special operations forces receive cultural and language training for use in the various theaters. They are attuned to social, ethnic, and religious sensitivities and differences that could effect how operations are conducted. The Green Berets are trained to work with indigenous populations, and they normally live directly with the people

they are supporting.⁵ They have great expertise in organizing foreign populations for internal defense. This expertise is easily adapted to disaster relief organization. Army civil affairs specialists work in foreign countries with local military and civilian authorities. Their expertise is in public health, education, sanitation, public works, agriculture, transportation, communications, and civil administration. They are employed throughout the world to train and advise foreign military forces in civic action projects useful to the local population.⁶ These capabilities are extremely valuable during disaster relief operations.

Another special operations capability that is beneficial during these missions is psychological operations. Normally employed in combat for psychological warfare purposes, these specialists can be employed to enhance efforts by forces who are organizing and creating a stable environment in which to conduct the operation. For example, they can drop leaflets, broadcast radio and television reports, and set up loudspeakers to inform the populations of relief activities, help organize them, and calm their anxiety.

Another characteristic of disaster assistance operations is that there is normally little or no infrastructure support available, and many occur in outlying/inaccessible areas. Whether it is refugees caught in civil war or a devastating flood, communications networks are down, roads and bridges are destroyed, sanitation facilities are non-existent, potable

water is scarce, and the list goes on. Special operations forces aircraft have extensive navigation and communications gear that can be used to assist in the initial location and assessment of the disaster area and then provide an initial command and control capability until a ground structure can be established. These aircraft also have special equipment that can enable them to be employed at night, if required.⁷

Special operations forces can be air dropped into these remote areas, assess the situation, prepare the population, establish drop zones, direct air drops, and organize distribution. They deploy with special long-range, highly reliable portable satellite communications sets that allow them to operate in these limited communications environments.⁸ Special operations forces are mature professionals, hand-picked and trained to perform under stress in crisis situations such as these.

A complicating factor in disaster assistance operations is that they must be coordinated with numerous civilian and governmental relief organizations that will be operating in the area. Many of these organizations are sanctioned by the United States Department of State, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and the United Nations. Special forces and civil affairs personnel have experience in coordinating with these agencies through their security assistance mission.⁹ In crisis response disaster relief operations, special operations forces can be utilized in the

initial stages to organize the effort, then hand over the operation to these and other experts who can continue once the situation is stabilized and the relief effort is organized. These capabilities and their professionalism make special operations forces well suited for humanitarian relief operations, as will be shown in Operations Sea Angel and Provide Comfort.

CHAPTER IV

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES PUT TO THE TEST

Two recent humanitarian relief operations, Sea Angel and Provide Comfort, provide the opportunity to illustrate the significant contributions special operations forces have made in crisis response situations. Both began in the spring of 1991. Sea Angel was mounted in response to a fierce cyclone that devastated the coastal islands and adjacent regions of Bangladesh. The second, Provide Comfort, was tasked to assist in a man-made disaster, Kurdish refugees fleeing Iraq after the Gulf War. There are similarities as well as differences in the two operations. A brief analysis of each will show that special operations forces were invaluable to both operations. Even though each had its unique characteristics, a basic concept plan can be prepared for these kinds of operations. Theater command planning staffs can learn from these missions and be better prepared for the next one.

In both disasters, national and international relief organizations were overwhelmed by the magnitude of the problem and sought assistance from the United States and other countries. After initial assessments in Bangladesh by the United States State Department, it was decided that the military would be required to assist because they were the only organization capable of mounting such a massive operation.¹

In Sea Angel, assistance was in the form of a joint task force (JTF) composed mostly of marines, sailors, and SEALS, augmented by Air Force and Army special operations forces. The JFT was an 'ad hoc' organization with no established plans to guide the commander. Within 24 hours of notification by United States Commander-in-Chief Pacific, the JTF commander and his assessment team were in Bangladesh. Once the basic relationship was established between the government of Bangladesh, the State Department, and the commander, relief efforts began.

First, they had to assess the devastation and stabilize the population. Green Beret disaster relief teams, equipped with long range radios, were sent with Bangladeshi soldiers to the remote outlying areas. They helped reassure the people and provided intelligence information so that aid could be sent to the most needy locations.² These special forces teams also provided basic emergency medical aid during the assessment.

Air force pararescue jumpers and combat control teams were dropped into remote areas to establish drop zones and help organize relief distribution. Army civil affairs personnel were instrumental in coordinating distribution of relief supplies. One officer was assigned to the United States Embassy in Dhaka to work with the host government and military, United States government and non-governmental organizations, and numerous international relief agencies.

Other civil affairs officers were on the ground, organizing distribution efforts. As one civil affairs officer put it, "conventional forces aren't trained to coordinate with civilian relief agencies and host governments during a disaster relief operation...Civil affairs is the link that ties together the agencies and activities for a cohesive effort when time is short and resources are limited."³

The JTF commander used the forces he had available and integrated them into an effective team. There was a heavy maritime presence during Sea Angel, but the effort could not have succeeded without the superb contributions of the Green Beret assessment teams and the civil affairs coordinators.⁴

Early in the operation, there was distrust of the military by both the Bangladesh government, the people, and international relief agencies. They had a hard time selling themselves, especially to the USAID organizers, who thought the military would come in "ham-fisted" and destroy everything they had set up. However, once they were on the ground and proved their worth, the military earned respect and appreciation for their professionalism and capabilities.⁵ The operation was successful in providing support to the thousands of disaster victims. Much of the success can be attributed to the unique capabilities demonstrated by the special operations forces during the initial stages of the operation.

Provide Comfort was somewhat different than Sea Angel in that it was a humanitarian intervention operation. It was

mounted at the request of the United Nations to relieve the suffering of Kurdish refugees fleeing the wrath of Saddam Hussein after the Persian Gulf War. International and Turkish relief agencies were totally overwhelmed by the numbers of refugees and the nightmarish logistics problems.

Subsequently, the United States and other nations' military forces were called in to assist.⁶ As in Sea Angel, the operation was set up in ad hoc fashion without a pre-established plan. The combined task force leadership, ingenuity, and flexibility made it work.

Over half a million traumatized refugees had fled to the remote, mountainous terrain along the Turkey-Iraq border with what they could carry. The Iraqis were chasing them and the Turkish government did not want them. The chaos and harsh conditions created a critical need for potable water, food, sanitation facilities, shelter, and medical care.⁷

The most urgent task was to relieve the starvation and stabilize the populations in the 8 major and over 30 smaller camps where the refugees were clustered. This mission was assigned to Task Force Alpha, Special Operations Command Europe. The key element was the Special Forces Group that organized and identified camps and drop zones, provided medical assistance as needed, and made plans for security requirements.⁸ Each special forces assessment team included Green Berets, Air Force pararescuers, and Air Force combat control teams. Special operations MH-53J Pave Low helicopters

were used to insert the teams because of their advanced navigation and communications capabilities, allowing them to locate the remote camps and communicate with the command center in Turkey.⁹ These small detachments conducted initial assessments, established the command, control, and communications necessary at the sites, identified camp leadership, and worked alongside the international relief agencies. Their maturity, cultural training, and experience made them the ideal force to enter the camps and deal with the indigenous population.¹⁰

When relief supplies started coming in by airdrops, the special operations teams helped organize distribution within the camps. Once the system was established, the Green Berets went to work applying their skills in other critical areas. Engineers established a potable water system. Others helped build latrines away from the water source to prevent contamination. They also taught the Kurds how to safely bury their dead and burn their trash to prevent disease. When the time came to transfer the refugees from the hills to resettlement camps and finally back to their towns, special forces, who had won the trust of the Kurds, reassured their security.¹¹

Civil affairs units planned, organized, and administered the temporary resettlement camps. They worked with the numerous coalition partners and international relief agencies to establish centralized distribution points. They also

planned with these organizations for the transition of responsibility for the humanitarian mission to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which occurred 2 months after the operation began.¹²

Psychological operations capabilities were also invaluable to this operation. They dropped leaflets to convey hope, encourage order, and identify and explain what the relief workers were doing. Later, loudspeakers were set up at the camps to pass information. They even piped in television and radio broadcasts. Specially prepared VCR tapes were also helpful in encouraging the Kurds to return to their homes.¹³

In all, over 30,000 military personnel from 13 nations were involved in the operation, establishing a secure environment and conducting the resupply efforts. Additionally, over 50 relief agencies were involved.

Special operations forces did not, by any means, do it all in either of these operations. However, they were, and will continue to be, invaluable in the initial stages of these relief operations because of their unique capabilities. Their language and cultural skills, special communications gear, and special aviation equipment capabilities allowed them to provide the required support to the relief victims.

The United Nations relief organizations were very impressed with the special operations forces and gained a true respect for their professionalism and ability to deal with these massive catastrophes. They worked so well together that

several United Nations agencies asked them to participate in an exercise to strengthen this new-found working relationship.¹⁴ United States special operations forces have gone a long way towards enhancing the image of our military in the eyes of many civilian relief agencies, foreign governments, and the countless victims they helped.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As we enter a new era of regional instability, humanitarian relief taskings will be the order of the day, especially in Africa and other developing countries. The United Nations used the Kurdish refugee situation as a test case for humanitarian intervention. With its success, the United Nations has, as in the case of Somalia, and will continue to intervene in these massive human rights catastrophes where a state cannot or will not provide the necessities for its people.

If these situations get out of hand and spill over into neighboring countries, regional instability could easily result. That is why the theater CINC must continually monitor his area and identify potential problems before a crisis occurs. Special operations forces are ready to meet the task, whether it is crisis prevention or crisis reaction.

As illustrated, special operations forces provide the theater CINC unique capabilities not found in conventional forces that can tie together the numerous elements of a humanitarian relief operation. Their inherent ability to deal with foreign nationals and international relief agencies in these chaotic situations means lives saved.

The CINC and his staff need to know these capabilities and how to best employ special operations forces, along with

conventional forces, to meet the operational and strategic objectives established for the humanitarian relief operation. What is needed is a basic humanitarian relief concept plan that takes the lessons from Sea Angel and Provide Comfort and establishes a foundation for these operations. This plan could enhance the coordination process in the early stages when time and teamwork among all agencies involved is so important. Additionally, the CINC, through his Special Operations component commander, should work with the United Nations relief organizations in developing exercises involving international relief agencies and special operations forces. These two actions should significantly enhance United States efforts in conducting humanitarian relief operations.

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